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AUTHOR Hettich, Paul; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Issues are discussed that graduate students may want to consider before seeking positions at small colleges. The discussion is based on perspectives gained from about 50 interviews as well as 50-60 resumes received from graduate students in psychology. Attention is directed to: enculturation of graduate school norms and their relation to job expectations and performance; the importance of pre-employment teaching experience and how to get it; self-presentation and interviewing issues; and examination of career values and goals in terms of flexibility of interests and commitment to students and the college community. In contrast to the attitudes prevalent among graduate students, the beginning college instructor may come to different conclusions, such as realizing that undergraduate teaching is demanding and more difficult than graduate-level instruction. Graduate students should try to teach different courses as much as possible, and should undertake coursework and workshops in college teaching. In addition, teacher applicants should come to job interviews with prepared questions concerning the department's philosophy, available support services, and working conditions. Finally, prospective small college teachers should evaluate their goals and values, including whether they are willing to be generalists. (SW)

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DEAR GRADUATE STUDENT (AND FUTURE PROFESSOR):

Paul Hettich
Sandra Lema-Stern
Joseph V. Rizzo

Barat College, Lake Forest, Illinois

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Dear Graduate Student:

ABSTRACT

The experience of graduate school in Psychology may develop inappropriate attitudes about teaching at small two- and four-year colleges. The writers share with prospective teachers issues and insights which are important for a successful first job in small colleges. These include: 1) enculturation of graduate school norms and their relation to job expectations and performance; 2) the importance of pre-employment teaching experience and how to get it; 3) self-presentation and interviewing issues; and 4) examination of career values and goals in terms of flexibility of interests and commitment to students and the college community.

Dear Graduate Student (and Future Professor):

When you began your graduate studies you may have thought about the possibility of teaching in a small, two-year or four-year college. Now that you are entering the job market, this possibility may loom even larger in your thoughts as the limited number of positions in college and university teaching becomes forcefully evident to you. Given the tight teaching market, we would like to share some thoughts with you regarding your impending job hunt in small two- and four-year colleges.

In the past five years we have interviewed three times at regional conventions and advertised in the APA Monitor. These recruitment efforts resulted in about fifty personal interviews and over three hundred resumes for our review. In addition, we typically receive fifty to sixty unsolicited resumes during years when we are not seeking faculty. In the process, we have developed some insights which we think generalize well beyond our own institution and which may be of help to you. These ideas relate to enculturation in a graduate school milieu, pre-employment teaching experience, interviewing skills, and a teacher's values and goals.

Examine Your Graduate School Subculture

Graduate schools clearly develop their own subcultural values and biases. In order to survive in a graduate program, you have probably developed an acute awareness of the subculture's social and organizational hierarchy and its power structure. In addition to being reasonably bright, you have probably become more or less compulsive, constructively (and sometimes frighteningly) paranoid, and cooperative with your instructors and advisors on most essential matters. You have likely modeled many of your instructors' attitudes and behaviors.

As a result of course specialization, you may value and know only the narrow content of your advisor's specialty area and your dissertation. Also, you may believe that research is more demanding and more important than teaching, that the best teaching occurs in graduate programs, and that the best undergraduates inevitably enter graduate programs. You may believe that people with degrees in education or psychiatry frequently don't know what they are talking about and that they have little firm knowledge of human behavior. You have probably come to believe that psychologists clearly have the most sophisticated training in research skills and, therefore, something of a monopoly on understanding behavior. Finally, you may be in a graduate program characterized by hostility and distrustful interpersonal communication (or perhaps your experience is opposite of this). The communication patterns that you've developed in graduate school may not be appropriate in future job settings.

Check your assumptions. When you begin teaching in an undergraduate institution you will make some discoveries. You will learn, for example, that not only is undergraduate teaching demanding, but also it is more difficult than graduate level instruction. Instead of wallowing in one's own more or less narrow research interests as graduate instructors often do (while assuming that competent students will learn whatever they need to learn on their own), you will have to learn to teach. You will have to learn to communicate clearly and concisely with students whose primary interests are often not in psychology but in art or history or education.

You will also learn that mastery of content in your discipline is not the only component of an education, nor even necessarily the most important one. You may discover that students learn more from your attitudes, your intellectual values, and your self-presentation than they do from your lectures.

You will discover that compulsive thoroughness is not always a virtue as you hear student minds click shut while you brilliantly expose flaws in each of the two or three dozen studies that you are reviewing on a single, often obscure, issue. Instead, you will recognize the necessity of making decisions regarding the value of certain ideas and studies without having the luxury of qualifying every statement. Consequently, you will be exposing yourself to potential criticism from students or colleagues for missing a study, failing to have read a review, or misunderstanding an issue.

In addition, you will learn that some people with education degrees are smarter than you (though you needn't worry too much about this possibility), that you can best relate to peers on a collegial rather than an adversary level, that other disciplines have a lot to say about human behavior even though they don't express it in probability levels, and most importantly, that good teaching is damn hard.

In short, you will have to learn that the culture you modeled in graduate school may be vastly different from the one you join when you sign your first contract. In fact, after a few years, you may even enjoy shucking off some of the cultural trappings of the graduate school.

Prepare to Teach

Over the years we have interviewed many bright, articulate, and attractive psychologists with impressive vitas, a string of publications, and recommendations from eminent psychologists. Nevertheless, we often place their resumes behind those who appear to have accumulated successful teaching experience. Other things being equal (and they rarely are), we prefer a candidate who may have only one or two graduate courses in a particular area, but who has also had one or two semesters of teaching experience in that area. We believe that

It is easier to learn content than it is to learn to teach effectively; and in a small liberal arts college we cannot afford to have students serve as guinea pigs for inexperienced teachers. Remember, in the two-year and four-year colleges, especially the smaller liberal arts schools, teaching and not research is the primary raison d'etre. You would be well advised to try to teach as many different courses as often as you can during your graduate studies.

However, teaching alone has limited value without feedback or an opportunity to examine the teaching-learning process. Enroll in a course or seminar on college teaching if your program offers one. If it does not, be sure to review Division 2 programs at APA conventions; subscribe to Division 2's quarterly journal Teaching of Psychology; attend such workshops and conferences on teaching as that offered annually by the University of Illinois Department of Psychology. Also, check your university for faculty development programs or a faculty resource center or center for teaching. Such centers typically subscribe to periodicals (e.g. Change, Journal of Higher Education), purchase books on teaching (e.g. Hoover, 1980; McKeachie, 1978; Milton, 1978), and sponsor workshops. They are staffed by faculty interested in discussing teaching. One of the writers, for example, attended a self-improvement program at the Center for the Teaching Professions at Northwestern University. This experience, combined with teaching experiences, gave her a decided edge over many other highly qualified candidates.

If none of these services is available, you could develop feedback groups in which you and a few colleagues attend each other's classes two to four times a semester to observe specific pre-determined teaching behaviors and provide mutual feedback.

In summary, since teaching is the most important activity at the two- and four-year college, we hire persons who have a mature interest and some successful experiences in teaching. By the way, if your teaching experiences are successful, don't hesitate to bring summaries of course evaluations or letters from supervising teachers.

Construct a Interview "Roadmap"

Despite the importance of a job interview, we are repeatedly surprised to encounter so many applicants with so little skill in self-presentation during an interview. An extensive literature on job interviewing has grown up in recent years (e.g. Platt et al, 1978) and many workshops are available to sharpen interviewing skills. Use them. However, don't "market" yourself as a product that ceases to exist once you've signed the contract. Our most qualified applicants are also good interviewers of us and have sufficient insight to know whether they will be able to fit comfortably into our setting.

Before interviewing, prepare a "roadmap" for yourself so that you inquire about such issues as: 1) course load and number of preparations; 2) departmental philosophy and biases; 3) support for development of teaching skills or research; 4) availability of departmental assistants and copy services; 5) films, supplies, and budgets; 6) procedures and criteria for promotion and tenure; 7) rank and tenure status of other departmental members; 8) institutional financial stability, identity, and atmosphere; 9) salary, salary increments, merit pay, fringe benefits, publication bonuses and convention funds; and 10) the quality of the library and its services. These questions, plus others that may be personally important to you, are vital if you are to make an informed decision about an institution in which you are going to work and grow.

Examine Your Values and Goals

Finally, you need also to ask yourself a series of important questions about your values and career goals. First, are you willing to become a generalist? For example, in many small colleges, courses are taught only once a year. It is not uncommon for an instructor to teach four to six different courses a year. You must be flexible enough to develop interests in many different areas and willing to do tremendous amounts of work for each preparation. You need not feel that you've betrayed your primary research interest when you develop new research interests, including those of students. In a few years, you'll become less of a specialist and more of a generalist. Some of us enjoy being generalists.

Second, are you genuinely committed to working with students? You'll need to be willing to schedule generous office hours and to work intensively with academically weak students outside of classes. You should view students first as persons whose lives extend beyond some narrow area of psychology, and secondly as members of your class. You must be sufficiently stable, patient, and socially adaptable to teach and work with a large variety of students: those who are extremely bright and mature; and those who are immature and who need guidance.

Third, are you willing to contribute to the life of the college community? Committee work, often more time consuming than teaching, is expected of faculty in most colleges. Similarly, you'll be asked to participate in panel discussions, student-faculty sports, recruitment, and similar events.

Fourth, can you interact effectively with other faculty? You may have to work with that curmudgeon of an Ancient History teacher (or is that an ancient History teacher?). You may soon find yourself involved in the volatile politics

of a small college campus where it is not uncommon to find a strong adversary on your promotion committee. You'll have to practice (not just preach) the social psychology of groups, power, organizational structures, and decision-making while remaining honest to yourself and relatively unscarred.

If you are able to answer these questions and face these issues honestly, you are well on your way to making what may be the most important career decision of your life. However, do not force or fake the answers, especially if you are desperate for a position. The people interviewing you already have struggled seriously with these issues; they know the answers which they are looking for, and they'll be able to gauge your responses with surprising accuracy.

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